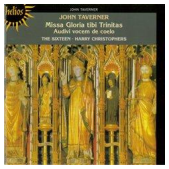
Taverner - Missa Gloria tibi Trinitas (The Sixteen)



1 Movement 1: Gloria [12'29] 2 Movement 2: Credo [10'17] 3 Movement 3: Sanctus and Benedictus [9'25] 4 Movement 4: Agnus Dei [8'34] 5 Audivi vocem de caelo [4'16] The Sixteen Harry Christophers - conductor

Not a great deal is known about the life of John Taverner. He is thought to have been born around 1490 in Lincolnshire, and is first documented in 1525 as a lay clerk at the collegiate church of Tattershall, a musical establishment of some importance. Later that year he was recommended by Bishop Longland of Lincoln for the new post of Informator (choirmaster) at Cardinal College (now Christ Church), Oxford, founded by Cardinal Wolsey and lavishly endowed with a choir of sixteen choristers and twelve ‘clerkes skilled in polyphony’. After overcoming an initial reluctance to leave the security of Tattershall, he accepted this prestigious invitation in time for the formal opening of the College in October 1526. Its glory proved to be short-lived, however, and after Wolsey’s fall from power in 1529 its fortunes and finances soon began to decline. Taverner resigned the post in 1530. For the next seven years his whereabouts are unknown. Possibly he worked as a freelance musician in London, or perhaps he returned directly to Lincolnshire. From 1537 Taverner was in Boston, maybe employed as an agent for Thomas Cromwell, who had been commissioned by Henry VIII to carry out a survey and valuation of the lesser monasteries and friaries prior to their dissolution. There is no truth in the persistent claim that Taverner was a fanatical persecutor in carrying out these duties. The significance of the often-quoted note in the 1583 edition of Foxe’s Acts and Monuments that Taverner came ‘to repent him very much that he had made songs to popish ditties in the time of his blindness’ may well have been exaggerated; Foxe, an ardent Protestant, was writing some forty years after the composer’s death, and the term ‘popish ditties’ remains open to interpretation. On the contrary, there is documentary evidence that Taverner had genuine concern for the welfare of the monks and friars. The assumption that he ceased to compose after leaving Oxford is based on speculation, since a proportion of his output has probably been lost and what has survived is not always easy to date. Taverner died in 1545 and was buried beneath the famous ‘stump’ of Boston church.

As the undisputed master of his generation, Taverner witnessed and greatly contributed to the final phase in the development of the florid style that had dominated English sacred music since the death of John Dunstable in 1453. If the works of Taverner's immediate precursor, William Cornysh (died 1523), represent the peak of sheer virtuosity, those of Taverner himself seem to proceed along a rather more serene path regulated as much by harmonic considerations as purely melodic ones.

The music of the generation before Taverner—for instance the unequivocally medieval florid writing of the Eton Choirbook—is the glorious culmination of a predominantly insular culture, developed and sustained in those great choral institutions which had been founded or substantially expanded in the fifteenth century. Some of Taverner's music remains firmly in this late-medieval tradition as regards form and aesthetic, even if the style is stripped of some of its florid detail. But in other works (presumably the later ones) there is evidence of a growing awareness of contemporary continental features, particularly in the systematic use of imitation, and a tendency towards clarity of texture and simplification of rhythm and line.

The music of Taverner, taken as a whole, represents the final development of the florid late-medieval English style, coupled with the assimilation of new aesthetic and technical features which indicate the growing influence of continental thought and practice. Individual works embody these two facets of Taverner's music in varying degrees, depending mainly on liturgical form and function, but also, to a certain extent, on their chronological position within the composer's output.

Gloria tibi Trinitas is deservedly the best-known of Taverner's three large-scale festal masses and took pride of place as the first item to be copied into the so-called Forrest-Heyther part-books, thought to have been compiled for use at Cardinal College during Taverner's tenure of office. Its title is derived from the plainchant cantus firmus 'Gloria tibi Trinitas', one of the antiphons for Trinity Sunday and doubly appropriate in view of the College's dedication to the Trinity. Scored for six-part choir with the high trebles so characteristic of English music of this period, the Mass is a masterpiece of finely balanced construction. Its cantus firmus, assigned to the mean part, is stated three times in each movement, in progressive rhythmic diminution. (The one exception to this pattern occurs in the Agnus Dei, where the expected second statement of the chant is omitted in favour of a freely composed passage of poignant serenity.) As was customary in English festal masses of this period, the Kyrie was not set to polyphony because it would have been sung to troped chant. The four constituent movements, broadly similar in length and outline, are linked by a common head motif. Within each one, variety of texture is brought about through the contrast between sonorous passages for full choir (invariably incorporating cantus firmus) and more delicately scored verses, often more imitative in conception.

The unusual grace that characterizes the section of the Benedictus beginning at ‘In nomine Domini’ was evidently recognized by contemporary musicians, several of whom included it in their anthologies of favourite extracts. Not only was it arranged for a variety of vocal and instrumental ensembles, but it also provided the inspiration for a new genre of major importance. Known as the ‘In nomine’, this instrumental form was distinguished by its cantus firmus, the ‘Gloria tibi Trinitas’ plainchant, and it was widely cultivated by English composers up to the end of the seventeenth century.

Taverner’s setting of the Matins responsory for All Saints’ Day, Audivi vocem de caelo, follows the well-established pattern of plainchant alternating with polyphony which incorporates the chant as a cantus firmus. Its unusual scoring for four high voices may be attributable to the liturgical custom associated with All Saints’ Day, whereby the responsory was sung by a group of five boys supposedly representing the five virgins described in the lesson immediately preceding. In fact one of the lower parts is not the work of Taverner, but was added ad placitum by a colleague at Cardinal College, William Whytbroke. --- Sally Dunkley, hyperion-records.co.uk

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